

1995

Welder May Have Sparked Deadly Blast at Shale Mine

By Vince Horiuchi
THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

Workers welding a steel grating to a vent tube may have caused a shaft full of flammable methane gas to explode at an oil-shale mine near Vernal, authorities said Thursday.

The explosion ripped part of the structure apart at the White River Oil Shale project site Wednesday afternoon, killing one man and injuring two others. The site is located about 45 miles southeast of Vernal.

The massive explosion also shot debris as much as 200 yards away, said Howard Cleavinger, assistant district manager for minerals for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

Rick Bilbey, 36, Vernal, was killed while he and two other men were placing the grating on the end of a vent tube, said Uintah County Undersheriff Bob Vanderbusse.

"They were putting a metal

grate on it to prevent anything from going down. The welding sparked the methane," he said. It was unknown why methane was seeping from the vent.

Glen Kurtz, 65, Roosevelt, was in stable condition Thursday at Ashley Valley Medical Center in Vernal with minor flash burns, lacerations and bruises, said hospital spokeswoman Linda Harris.

The third worker, Tom Justice, 55, Roosevelt, was treated and released from the same hospital Thursday morning. A family member said he was unavailable for comment.

The three men, who work for a Roosevelt energy construction company, were contracted by BLM officials to seal the mine. The facility has been out of production for more than 10 years, Cleavinger said.

The underground shaft where they were working measured 32 feet in diameter. A vent tube

about eight inches in diameter pokes out of the ground about 10 to 12 feet.

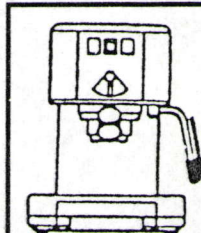
Wednesday night, authorities could not get close to the shaft because the deadly methane gas was

still escaping.

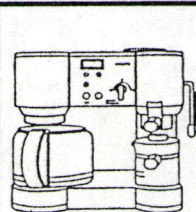
"We went in and recovered body and got out of there," Vanderbusse said.

Investigators from the Safety and Health Admini-

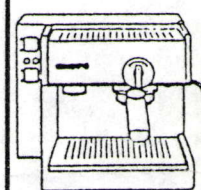
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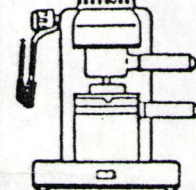
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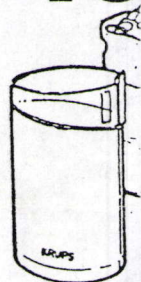
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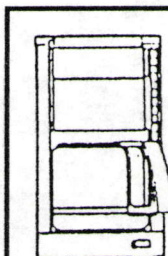
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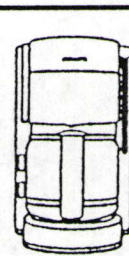
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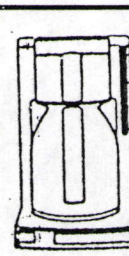
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about eight inches in diameter pokes out of the ground about 10 to 12 feet.

Wednesday night, authorities could not get close to the shaft because the deadly methane gas was

still escaping.

"We went in and recovered the body and got out of there," Van-derbusse said.

Investigators from the Mine Safety and Health Administration

were looking over the site Thursday afternoon after no traces of gas could be detected.

Sheriff's deputies cordoned off the area in a five-mile radius and restricted airspace up to 2,000

feet above.

The BLM took control of the site after White River Oil Shale stopped production in 1984. Federal officials began sealing the mine last summer.

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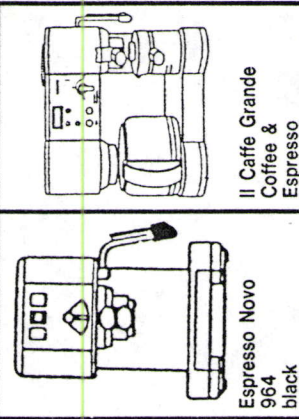
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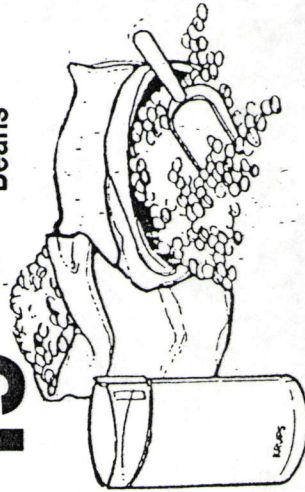
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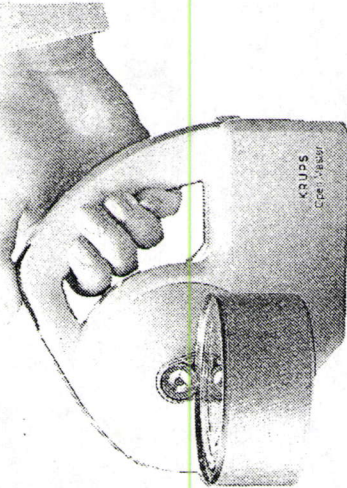
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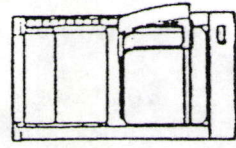
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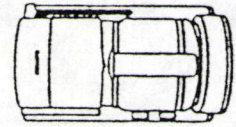
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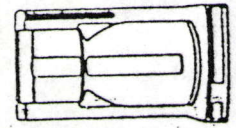
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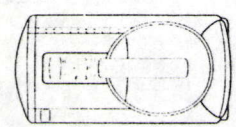
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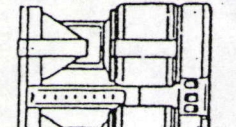
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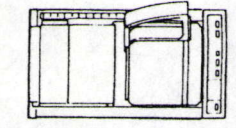
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